

**Critique architecturale
et débat public**

sous la dir. de **Hélène Jannièrè & Paolo Scrivano**

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Abstract This article proposes a perspective on the Italian pop star Adriano Celentano as a critic of architecture, by a close reading of song lyrics and careful listening to music and instrumentation. The signature hit *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* (lit. “The Boy from Via Gluck”, 1966) is not the only song in which the singer-songwriter criticizes modern architecture and urbanization, his *I Want to Know* (1976) about the lack of space in modern apartments being at least nationally as famous. What such pop criticism obviously lacks in expertise, I argue, it gains in proximity to the audience and acute awareness of the experience of architecture in the everyday. What is more, *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* addressed the post-war suburban reality of Italian cities before the professional debate picked up on such issues. With its accurate polemics and dismissal of professional concerns and terms, Celentano’s criticism seems more knowledgeable than expert discourse, and actually was at the spearhead of post-modern critique.

What is particularly interesting is Celentano’s incompetence in architecture and competence in music. Already the title of *I Want to Know* suggests his lack of knowledge, in this case the inability of a layperson to grasp the aims of modern architecture. Celentano’s music, on the other hand, perfectly mirrors the design and experience of the modern housing estates he criticizes, with its pronounced

repetitiveness and almost annoyingly slow rhythm. This article analyses such issues, examining the core topics and strategies, musical as well as textual, of Celentano’s critique.

I posit to extend the notion of what can be understood as “architectural criticism” and its actors, beyond professional journals and critics to pop songs and singer-songwriters, not least in their capacity to reach audiences far beyond the limits of the architectural discipline, which underlines their status as central contributors to a debate on architecture beyond elite circles.

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On via Gluck. Adriano Celentano as Architectural Critic *

Architectural criticism – as architectural discourse in general – is not limited to those in professional circles publishing articles in the core journals of the discipline. As architecture concerns many, it is discussed by many, and not so rarely do lay contributions form an unexpected avant-garde to the professional debate. Famously, American writer Norman Mailer attacked what he termed modern urbanism’s “empty landscapes of psychosis” when modernism was still in full swing (Mailer, 1963; cited by Levine, 2005: 21). But criticism can come in forms even more popular, and less intellectual, than that.

The song *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* (lit. “The Boy from *Via Gluck*”, 1966) by Italian singer-songwriter Adriano Celentano, co-written with companions Miki Del Prete and Luciano Beretta, is one of Italy’s best-known pop hits¹. Despite its now famous

elimination from the 1966 Festival di Sanremo competition, then considered the pinnacle of success in popular music, the single went on to sell more than a million copies immediately thereafter, and today is a song many Italians know by heart². It was included as one of 21 “love declarations” in a published collection of German *Rolling Stone* editors’ 222 favourite songs in 2013 (Pfeil, 2013).

Even beyond national borders and bias, *Il ragazzo* incorporates the sound of post-war Italy like few other songs, or it tells the story not just of a boy who grew up in a street called *Via Gluck*, but of the urbanization of post-war Italy. The song is an extended coming-of-age story, a narration of the protagonist’s development from boy to man, and is paralleled by the temporal development of the scene from rural to urban. These are the lyrics:

* This article is based on a paper originally given at the second *Mapping Architectural Criticism* international symposium “Actors and Vehicles of Architectural Criticism” (October 4–5, 2016: Università di Bologna).

1 A note on authorship: The songs discussed in this article were all performed and made famous by Adriano Celentano. For a larger audience, the identification of the songs with Celentano is a matter of course, somewhat like a Mozart opera is known as such, and not as a da Ponte opera (who was often Mozart’s co-author); or a building by Chipperfield is known as a building by Chipperfield despite the office’s several hundred employees. It is for this reason that the role of “architectural critic” is here given to Celentano, though many of his songs were co-written with others in the Celentano circle, the so-called Clan Celentano. On the Clan and co-authorship, see Manfredi (1981: 55).

2 The literature on Celentano’s music is rarely academic and largely hagiographic. Relatively critical accounts of Celentano’s work and specifically *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*, are Manfredi (1981: 70–73); Fittante (1997); Cotti (2007: 57); Perini (2010: 59–62); Giannelli (2012: 64); Manconi and Brinis (2012: 138); Piancatelli (2012: 57, 169). On the popularity of the song’s lyrics, see note 17 below – or, better, ask any of your Italian friends.

*Questa è la storia di uno di noi
anche lui nato per caso in via Gluck
in una casa fuori città
gente tranquilla che lavorava*

*Là dove c'era l'erba, ora c'è
una città
e quella casa in mezzo al verde ormai
dove sarà?*

*Questo ragazzo della via Gluck
si divertiva a giocare con me
ma un giorno disse: "Vado in città"
e lo diceva mentre piangeva*

*Io gli domando: "Amico, non sei contento?
Vai finalmente a stare in città."*

*Là troverai le cose che non hai
avuto qui
potrai lavarti in casa senza andar
giù nel cortile."*

*"Mio caro amico", disse, "qui sono nato
e in questa strada ora lascio il mio cuore
ma come fai a non capire
[che] è una fortuna per voi che restate
a piedi nudi a giocare nei prati
mentre là in centro io respiro il cemento*

*Ma verrà un giorno che ritornerò
ancora qui
e sentirò l'amico treno che
fischia così: uah uah."*

*Passano gli anni, ma otto son lunghi
però quel ragazzo ne ha fatta di strada
ma non si scorda la sua prima casa
ora coi soldi lui può comperarla
torna e non trova gli amici che aveva
solo case su case, catrame e cemento*

*Là dove c'era l'erba, ora c'è
una città
e quella casa in mezzo al verde ormai
dove sarà?
[...]*

This is the story of one of us
He, too, by chance born in Via Gluck
In a house outside the city
[Among] tranquil working people

Where once was grass is now
a city
And this house surrounded by greenery
Where is it now?

This boy from Via Gluck
Enjoyed playing with me
But one day he said, "I'm going to the city"
And he said it as he cried

I asked him, "My friend, aren't you happy?
Finally, you're going to live in the city

There you will find everything you
Didn't have here.
You can wash in your flat without going out
into the courtyard."

"My dear friend," he said, "I was born here
And in this street, I will now leave my heart
How come you don't understand
What a blessing it is for those of you who remain
Playing barefoot in the meadows
While I, in the centre, will breathe cement

But the day will come when I will return
Here again
And I will hear my friend the train
That whistles like this: woo woo."

Years have passed by, but eight are long
And the boy made his way
But did not forget his first house
Now he can buy it with his money
He returns but does not find the friends he had
Only houses upon houses, tar and cement

Where once was grass is now
A city
And this house surrounded by greenery
Where is it now?
[...]³

3 Text quoted here based on Manfredi (1981: 71). Lyrics by Luciano Beretta and Miki del Prete, music by Adriano Celentano. English translation is my own.

The personal as well as the urban progress described in the lyrics is mirrored in the music, which picks up as the song advances. Its initial simplicity – *una casa fuori città* – is ascribed by a near absence of rhythm, the singer’s almost a cappella voice accentuated only by individual chords strummed on an acoustic guitar. With the second stanza, the strumming becomes rhythmic; with the third, string instruments are introduced. It is only in the final, extended fourth stanza when the years have passed and the boy returns to the street of his youth, finding it completely transformed, that drums, bass and eventually brass instruments set in. With numerous shifts of narrator’s perspective and its carefully orchestrated instrumentation, the song merits closer examination. In the following, I will trace and discuss points and strategies of architectural criticism among the lines and sounds of this song, supporting and extending my argument with some limited further examples of Celentano’s work.

If in dissecting what is criticized and how the problem is addressed this essay is more serious than one pop song might warrant, this is because a) one should leave the jokes to Celentano, and b) such pop architectural criticism has to be taken seriously for the enormous impact it has, due to its popularity, and because it gains in musical what it clearly lacks in architectural competence. Three major issues with Celentano’s points, as well as strategies of critique, will be examined more closely here: first, urbanization; second, the incomprehensibility of modern architecture; and third, the broken promises of modernism.

Critique of urbanization

Strictly speaking, *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* is not architectural criticism but a critique of urbanization. The lyrics that allude to architecture are, to say the least, vague. The song, however, conveys a powerful image of a rural or peripheral area becoming an urban one. This boils down to the refrain “*Là dove c’era l’erba, ora c’è/una città/e quella casa in mezzo al verde ormai/dove sarà?*” The grass, *l’erba*, is replaced by *una città*, a city beneath which an individual house has disappeared. Once surrounded by greenery, locating it is now impossible in the new scenery. The lyrics make a significant further grammatical shift: *quella casa*, this house, is replaced by *case su case*, houses upon houses. While the connotation of *casa*, ie. a singular house, is positive, the connotation of *case*, plural, is negative. This may well be so because *casa* in Italian denotes both the building and the family and community within: one speaks of *casa mia*, my family, or one can say *tanti saluti a casa tua*, say hi to your folks⁴.

Urbanization not just of landscape but of human beings is the topic of another song by Celentano. While the *ragazzo* remains removed from what has happened to Via Gluck, looking on, estranged, at its transformation, the song *Un albero di trenta piani* (lit. “A Tree of Thirty Floors”), from 1972, describes a process of transformation of its protagonists, a couple who have moved from the country to the city, happy and naturally beautiful people – *Belli come noi... dalla campagna* – who, when confronted with city life, dream about the growth not of skyscrapers but of a thirty-storey tree:

4 In the Italian dictionary Treccani (2017) “*casa*” not only describes the built structure but also the family, its union and intimacy: “Le persone conviventi di una stessa famiglia e quindi anche la famiglia stessa: *tanti saluti a c. tua; pensare a c., scrivere a c.; [...] possiamo parlare con libertà, Giorgio è di c., è uno della famiglia, è persona intima; prendere in c. qualcuno, accoglierlo come parte della propria famiglia*”.

*Per la tua mania
di vivere
in una città
guarda bene come ci ha
conciati
la metropoli.*

*Belli come noi
ben pochi sai
ce n'erano
e dicevano
quelli vengono
dalla campagna.*

*Ma ridevano
si spanciavano
già sapevano
che saremmo ben presto anche noi diventati
come loro
tutti grigi come grattacieli con la faccia di
cera
con la faccia di cera è la legge di questa
atmosfera
che sfuggire non puoi fino a quando tu vivi in
città.
[...]*

Because of your obsession
With living
In a city
See now, how
We have been corrupted
By the metropolis.

As beautiful as us
Only few, you know,
Were,
And they said:
They come
From the countryside.

But they laughed
Busting a gut
Knowing already
That very soon we, too, would have become
Like them
All grey like skyscrapers with faces of wax

With faces of wax, as is the rule of this
atmosphere
That you cannot escape as long as you live
in the city.
[...]⁵

5 Text quoted here based on Manfredi (1981: 97–98). Lyrics and music by Adriano Celentano. Translation into English is my own.



Fig. 1 Charles Eisen (draughtsman), Jacques Aliamet (engraver), *Frontispice allégorique*, frontispiece plate for M.-A. Laugier (le P., 1755), *Essai sur l'architecture*, new (2nd) edition, Paris, Duchesne. Source: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, RAR 1254. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-128/>

Undoubtedly more effective than the lyrics is the music. Unusual for a pop song, *Un albero di trenta piani* is written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. The dance it conjures, however, is not an elegant urban, Viennese-style waltz, but one more befitting a popular village ball. This becomes clear by the simple instrumentation: a strummed Western guitar and closed hi-hat characteristically underlined by a trombone applying clumsy, heavy accents to each first beat. Significantly, the trombone becomes overlaid with the sounds of a Hammond organ from the line *Ma ridevano* onwards, to accentuate the city dwellers' cynical reactions to the couple. Eventually, the song becomes more modern and urban and finally, in accordance with the lyrics, turns into a perversion of the original country folk dance when a distorted amplified electric guitar takes over⁶.

If urbanization is one of Celentano's points of critique, his strategy is to simply design a counter-image: that of a rural society where everybody is in harmony with each other and the countryside. Recurring components are both greenery and the colour green, a rural society or rather community, and eventually *amore*, love. The role that grass and greenery play in *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* has been discussed above. Happiness is defined in the third stanza as playing in the meadows, bare-footed. *Erba, verde and prati* are all part of a colour scheme that creates a simple contrast between green on the one side and the grey of *catrame e cemento*, tar and cement, on the other. The *casa fuori città* described in the first stanza is thus nothing but the pop equivalent of Marc-Antoine Laugier's primitive hut, which famously figured as the frontispiece of the 1755 edition of his *Essai sur l'architecture* (Fig. 1). Indeed, the contrast of green and grey and the connotation of a harmonious community with grass and meadows is a Celentano topos⁷. One encounters it again in the *Albero di trenta piani*, where urbanites are described as being *tutti grigi / come grattacieli*, all grey like skyscrapers, while in the stanza following those above, the couple recalls their time sunbathing in the nude, surrounded by plants:

*Nuda sulla pianta
prendevi
il sole con me
[...]*

*Naked on the tree
you were
sunbathing with me
[...]*⁸

6 On *Un albero di trenta piani*, see Manfredi (1981: 97–98). Manconi and Brinis (2012: 139) interpret the song as a critique of the Pirelli Tower (1960) in Milan, designed by Giò Ponti and Pier Luigi Nervi.

7 Cf. the chapter *L'ecoista* in Fittante (1997: 57–61).

8 See note 3 above.



Fig. 2 Adriano Celentano pressing grapes in competition with a machine, scene from the film *Il bisbetico domato* (1980). Source: *Il bisbetico domato/Der gezähmte Widerspenstige*, 1980. Film. Directed by CASTELLANO & PIPOLO [FRANCO CASTELLANO & GIUSEPPE MOCCIA]. IT, Mario and Vittorio Cecchi Gori.

The meadow finds its way into another Celentano hit from 1966, a few months after *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*. This is called *Una festa sui prati* (lit. “A Party in the Meadows”) and sets out:

*Una festa sui prati
una bella compagnia
panini, vino e un sacco di risate
e luminosi sguardi di ragazze innamorate
[...]*

A party in the meadows
In beautiful company
Sandwiches, wine and lots of laughs
And the luminous looks of girls in love
[...]⁹

Here, too, the *prati* are a guarantee of a happy community. *Siamo tutti buoni amici*, we are all good friends, the following stanza begins – or even more than, as hinted at by the *luminosi sguardi di ragazze innamorate*. Indeed, as the song progresses, the lyrics suggest that one should not exchange

punches in a fight for a career, but hold hands and unite in love. *Amare* rather than *lottare* is the ideal, Celentano’s version of ‘make love not war’. To be clear, with love as the bond that unites people, and the idealization of kinship and friendship, Celentano evokes an ideal not of society but of a pre-enlightened community. This means *Gemeinschaft* rather than *Gesellschaft*, to put it in the terms of sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1963), or an *ideologia del “paese”* as Italian singer-songwriter Gianfranco Manfredi calls it in one of the rather few critical publications on Celentano¹⁰. In songs as well as his self-imaging, Celentano never tires of portraying himself as a country man – most famously in his 1980 film *Il bisbetico domato* (lit. “The Taming of the Scoundrel”) in which he competes with a machine that presses grapes (and, of course, wins). (Fig. 2)

9 Text quoted here based on Manfredi (1981: 52). Lyrics by Luciano Beretta, Miki Del Prete and Mogol, music by Adriano Celentano and Mariano Detto.

10 Manfredi (1981: 73). Celentano’s alleged *ideologia del paese* can be situated within the wider framework of Italian antimodernist culture, well epitomized in the 1920s and 1930s by Mino Maccari’s *strapaese* literary movement and its view of Italian society as based on ethnic identity and rural values.

Critique of the incomprehensibility of modern architecture and of architectural expertise

Il ragazzo della via Gluck's second point of critique could be defined as the incomprehensibility of modern architecture, and of architectural expert knowledge. The song ends, both in lyrical and musical terms, in a sort of coda to the whole not quoted above. When the perspective eventually shifts again to the first-person narrator and the song becomes a kind of lament, the persona expresses his inability to grasp the situation – not just that of Via Gluck, but more generally of urbanization:

[...]
non so, non so
perché continuano
a costruire le case
e non lasciano l'erba
 [...]

[...]
 I don't know, I don't know
 Why they continue
 To build houses
 And do not keep the grass
 [...]"

Non so, non so: The lack of understanding is expressed twice and, what is more, the narrator is obviously not part of this process; an anonymous third person plural builds the houses. Brass instruments echo the theme, making the question of the individual a universal one, and turning the voice's tone of wonder into one of accusation. The process of modernization told by the actual *storia* ends on an inconclusive note. Not understanding, not grasping, being confronted with processes of modernization in wonder and estrangement, all are themes that characterize much of Celentano's music, not just the famous *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*. Ten years later, the inability of the narrator of *I Want to Know* to understand modern architecture actually made it into the title. Keeping the maximal distance from what

one might expect of entertaining Italo-pop, *I Want to Know* is the antithesis of a hit. This has not, however, kept Celentano from including the song as an extensive eight-minute double feature on the albums *Svalutation* (1976) and *Quel punto* (1994). The lead line, *Vorrei sapere* (lit. "I would like to know"), and the more direct *I want to know*, appears in both Italian and English a total of fifty-eight times in this longer version:

I want to know
I want to know
vorrei sapere
vorrei sapere
come fa la gente
a concepire
di potere vivere
nelle case d'oggi
inscatolati come le acciughe
nascono i bimbi che han già le rughe
 [...]

I want to know
 I want to know
 I would like to know
 I would like to know
 How people can possibly
 Conceive of
 Being able to live
 In today's houses
 Squashed like anchovies
 Children are born already with wrinkles
 [...]"¹²

11 See note 3 above.

12 Lyrics by Luciano Beretta and Adriano Celentano, music by Gino Santercole.

The message is clear: the first-person narrator and with him the people – represented from the second stanza onwards by a background choir – declare his words fully incapable of comprehending how one could possibly conceive of living in modern apartment blocks, pressed together like canned fish, and why no one protests against the building of such houses. This is once again addressed a few lines on in the third person, where *i costruttori*, the builders, rhymes with *questi orrori*, these horrors.

Celentano's architectural criticism in this case has a two-fold strategy: first, he counters modernism's incomprehensibility with a comprehensible device; and two, he confronts – and ridicules – with evident dilettantism what he interprets as false expertise.

As opposed to those that build “houses upon houses”, and to the *costruttori* of *orrori*, the *ragazzo* is introduced as someone the audience can immediately comprehend, both intellectually and emotionally. The story is of no one particular person, but of “one of us” – *uno di noi* – who, too, as the song goes, is born in Via Gluck. The lyrical strategy is thus one of engagement. Celentano's preference for community has already been identified and in this case, the audience is actually included in a community that has, it is implied, shared a fate. Indeed, to some extent, this is true. The song describes what happened to so many Italian cities in the post-war boom years, with rapid growth absorbing rural or peripheral areas into larger urban textures. The song thus mirrors, in a microcosm, what happened on a larger scale: the transformation of an entire country from a predominantly agricultural to highly industrialized one. Nowhere in Europe did this happen with such force and speed as in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s¹³.

What adds to the comprehensibility, importantly, is that the song is firmly based on biographical facts. Celentano was indeed born at number 14 of Via Gluck (Fig. 3),

a narrow street just a few hundred metres from Milano Centrale railway station and parallel to the tracks of the train whose sound the lyrics mimic¹⁴. Despite the station name, the Via Gluck of the immediate post-war years was not part of central Milan, and it was partially flanked by buildings on only one side¹⁵. While one might want to keep a careful distance to biographical interpretations of lyrics, almost nothing written about the song in the largely hagiographic “secondary” Celentano literature makes a distinction between Adriano Celentano and the boy from Via Gluck¹⁶ – and probably nor do many fans. The song is one of identification versus modernist estrangement. Celentano has always promoted his image as *uno di noi*, happily giving interviews in which he describes his humble upbringing in Via Gluck in scenes resembling those of the song. Already in 1963, before the song was even written, a somewhat snobbish bourgeois journalist of Milanese newspaper *Corriere d'informazione* noted Celentano's appeal to Italy's peripheral social classes when writing about one concert:

“It is clear that Celentano pleases so many of those guys from the suburbs who come, only on Sunday afternoons, to the Piazza del Duomo, because he treats them as if they had always been his friends. They called him by first name, in the Galleria [Vittorio Emanuele] they talked of him as if they had been walking arm in arm with him forever¹⁷”.

The second part of Celentano's strategy to respond to the false expertise and incomprehensibility of modern architecture

13 For what happened in post-war Milan, see Cavallazzi and Falchi (1989: 178–197). A sharp critical account of Milan's unregulated (sub)urbanization in the 1960s and 1970s is Graziosi (1980).

14 On Celentano's youth see Perini (2010), especially pages 9–14.

15 See the plan of Milan in 1953 in Farina *et al.* (1973: 135, fig. C1).

16 Thus, even the critical perspective of Manfredi (1981) on Celentano relates the latter's life through his song lyrics as if mirroring the singer's biography.

17 “È chiaro che [Celentano] piace a tanti di questi ragazzi di periferia, che in piazza del Duomo ci vengono solo di domenica pomeriggio, perché lui li tratta come se fossero suoi amici da sempre. Gli davano del tu, in galleria parlavano di lui come se lo avessero sempre a braccetto.” Article by Edgarda Ferri in the *Corriere d'informazione*, 12 December 1963 (cited by Manfredi, 1981: 58).



Fig. 3 14, *via Gluck, Milan*, where Adriano Celentano grew up, as it looks today. Photo: Erik Wegerhoff, October 2016.



4

Fig. 4
Apartment houses (built 1920s) along the viale delle Provincie, Rome. Photo: Anna Vyazemtseva, architectural historian, Rome, October 2016.

Fig. 5
*Adriano Celentano as architect, snapshot from the music video for the song *I Want to Know*, ca. 1976–1977. Music video. Directed by s.n. IT, [s.n.]. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/AUxmvAS7fvs> [available on October 31st, 2017].*



5

is conspicuously enacted dilettantism. Celentano constantly plays with both his supposed lack of intelligence and clear common sense. This is an integral part of his humour, particularly the facial expressions he uses in film, as becomes clear from a scene where he plays an architect discussed further on.

Critique of the broken promises of modernism

The third and last point of critique can be called the broken promises of modernism, or modernization – modernism as an architectural style characterized by lack of ornamentation, of historical references and by prefabrication, and modernization as a more general, not least economic, advancement of society¹⁸. Celentano’s song is one of progression, not of progress. The *ragazzo* did actually experience economic success; within eight years he made enough money to buy his childhood home. But he must now realize that the house is gone, and so are his friends. Financial advancement is not synonymous with a satisfied life. Disillusionment with a lack of progress and the emptiness of the promises of modernization are a core theme of *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*. The song can thus be considered an early contribution to postmodernism. Disillusionment with urban rather than social progress boils down to the lines *Là dove c’era l’erba, ora c’è / una città*. The end of the belief in progress can be highlighted by comparing this with an inscription in a series of houses built by the fascist Italian government in the 1920s along the *viale delle Provincie* in Rome, near the Piazza Bologna (Fig. 4). In the simplistic Latin characterizing much of Mussolini’s neo-Roman propaganda, this reads:

*Ubi erat silva et umbra
nunc domus frequentes.*

Where once there were woods and shade
Are now numerous houses.

At least according to this inscription, the substitution of green space with houses in the 1920s could be propagated as a positive sign of progress, as a matter of course. In 1966, an identical line has exactly the opposite meaning.

The strategies of Celentano’s early “post-modern” critique are, again, manifold. In the first place, he counters the broken promises of modernization with the song’s credibility; then, he displays satire; finally, he practices imitation.

Much of what can be said about the song’s emphasis on comprehensibility can also be said about its credibility. With its names, and with Celentano seemingly being the personification of the *ragazzo*, the narrated *storia* is specific enough to be credible, and yet generic enough to be transferable onto others’, that is the audience’s, experiences. Importantly, the text provides emotional credibility. The song makes use of the somewhat corny but effective means of introducing string instruments when the *ragazzo* confesses that by leaving his old home in Via Gluck he is leaving behind his heart. The strings’ deliberate, vibrato-heavy whine is picked up by the “woo woo” of the passing trains but is just as much a sound of lament. The song thus makes an emotional appeal to architecture and urbanism, one that relies on personal experience and memories and is, not least, nostalgic. All are aspects seemingly lacking in the perceived rational realm of modern architecture, whose recipes for ubiquitous modernization are here criticized by emotional site-specificity.

Second, the display of satire. Not in *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* but in a music video for *I Want to Know*, Celentano also briefly inhabits the role of the architect while impersonating a builder (Fig. 5). Lowering his gaze – as architects indeed often do – to a cardboard model of what looks like a late modernist megastructure, he carefully orchestrates an expression of a total lack of intelligence, the dilettantism mentioned above. His face eventually broadens into a smile, when he picks a daisy – anything but an architectural element – from a neighbouring meadow, and uses it to crest the construction. Celentano’s city crown consists of *erba*.

¹⁸ For a discussion on these concepts, see Cohen (2017).

Finally, the use of imitation. There is a reason why *I Want to Know* is at first painfully slow; why the text is repetitive, saying the same thing in two languages; and why much of it consists of a theme of only four notes and two chords in minor keys. All this is nothing other than a musical imitation, or mirroring, of the modern apartment blocks that are the subject of the song. These, too, are repetitive and exhausting, the music implies, and what such architecture does to humans can be heard in Celentano's voice, which sounds tired and distressed. Furthermore, with its partially English text, its structure of call and response, and its soulful background chorus, the song is reminiscent of African-American slave songs: people are, the structure and sound imply, slaves to modern architecture. Since the song is nonetheless a pop hit, it picks up considerably in its second half in order not to miss its envisioned audience. What was an exhausted lament accompanied only by a guitar eventually becomes a 1970s soul-pop song, betraying its production date.

The constellation of mocking imitation, repetition and criticism of modernism's and technology's promises must also explain the strange phenomenon of a third Celentano song which may serve to wrap up this essay. His *Mondo in mi 7a* (lit. "The World in E7"), was published in 1966, like *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*. The entire song consists of just the one chord which gives the song its title. The seventh chord creates a dissonance which does nothing but convey the narrator's dissatisfaction with the state of the world described in the lyrics: war, hunger, investment in useless technology, hypocrisy. In spite of its absurd limitation to just one chord, the song does have a beat; in the end, however, it runs itself almost dead in the endless repetition of the ever-same motif and ever-same bar. That this motif is played twenty-two times in the final section can be considered, I would argue, an intelligent critique of modern technology. It references the then-common phenomenon of a broken record, sounding like a needle stuck in a vinyl groove. The end of *Mondo in mi 7a* is again simply a criticism of modernity's and modern technology's promises.

In the end: *Le robe che ha detto Adriano, or what the songs actually say*¹⁹

In the end, Celentano's songs say little about architecture explicitly. Descriptions remain vague, generalizations abound, and rarely is a cliché spared. Yet the song lyrics are powerful in their simplicity; their simplification, equally a cause for intellectual scepticism, allows for emotional engagement. It is in this way that Celentano managed to reach an overwhelmingly large audience. In his grand 2012 appearance, an aging rock star in the Arena di Verona, he only sang the first line of *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*, with the rest of the song sung by the crowd²⁰. By evoking a nostalgia for a supposedly better, vaguely pre-modern world, Celentano might well join a reputed group of critical architectural authors, from Peter Blake and his praise of a formerly beautiful America, to Juhani Pallasmaa and his evocations of childhood towns²¹. A quality that clearly remains unique to Celentano, however, is his competence in putting architectural criticism to sound – and in that sense, this issue of *CLARA* would clearly benefit from an enclosed vinyl record. The brass-sharp accusations of the continued building of houses at the end of *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*, the unbearable repetitiveness and musical simplicity of *I Want to Know*, the contrast of country and city in the changing instrumentation of *Un albero di trenta piani* – all confront modern civilization with a mirror-image just as revealing and accusing as it is – and this is truly unique in architectural criticism – danceable.

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19 *Le robe che a detto Adriano* is the title of a 1969 (compilation) album by the singer.

20 Listen to www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrh22pos1PA (accessed 31 October 2017).

21 See Blake (1964), Pallasmaa (1996), and Wegerhoff (2016).

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